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SUBJECT: BELARUS: MEDVEDEV'S SYMBOLIC VISIT

¶1. (SBU) Summary and Comment: On June 22, Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev paid a first official visit to Belarus, at the invitation of President Lukashenko. Meeting at the site of the Nazi invasion of the USSR during World War II, the presidents discussed a range of bilateral issues. While expressing commitment to expanding cooperation on market economic and other issues within the framework of the existing Union State, the leaders made no public statements about highly-anticipated gas price negotiations. Although not producing any significant policy developments, Medvedev's visit so early in his tenure indicates Russia's commitment to keeping Belarus close within its sphere of influence. End summary and comment.

The Union Will Go On

¶2. (U) The Russian and Belarusian Presidents marked the sixty-seventh anniversary since the Nazi invasion of the USSR with a meeting in Brest, the army's point of entry. At a joint press conference following an extended meeting, Lukashenko and Medvedev expressed "satisfaction with the consistent development of the bilateral relations" and confirmed "adherence to the Union State Treaty of December 8, 1999." Their stated priorities included consistent expansion of the bilateral integration, enforcement of the collective security system, increase of humanitarian interaction, improving the welfare of the two nations. In his conversations with WWII veterans after the meeting, Medvedev noted that the Union State "exists, and we just need to fill it with substantial contents." Medvedev highlighted progress in bilateral relations, which he called "relations of a strategic partnership." According to the Russian leader, the presidents "revised various projects" and pointed to "very good" advancement. Lukashenko said he was pleased to hear from Medvedev that, as he rephrased it, "these eight years that they had been working, tumbling, stumbling" yielded "powerful movement ahead." Lukashenko said it was important "to hear the new Russian President's assessment," and said he understood that "[the Union State] can proceed, and we have good grounds for that." Medvedev stated that in order to move forward, "no extraordinary goals should be set" as they simply must "implement existing agreements" and execute concrete economic, political projects that "ensure our common security". Medvedev stressed that the negotiations demonstrated that the two leaders have similar assessments of the current situation and prospects of "amicable and close" bilateral ties.

Yes To Economic Cooperation

¶3. (U) Lukashenko and Medvedev endorsed a joint declaration urging further development of bilateral economic relations based on the principles of market economy. The document calls for increased "trade and economic cooperation based on the principles of market economy, equality, mutual benefits, and consideration of each other interests." It also "encourages efforts of Russian and Belarusian investors, facilitation of joint productions, expansion of manufacturing cooperation, especially under the Union programs."

Medvedev pointed to the importance of trade growth, noting that bilateral trade grew by 65 percent between January and April 2008, calling it "a very good indicator" and urging to "preserve this pace." The two parties committed to "pursue unified tariff and non-tariff" customs policies and to "remove obstacles in mutual trade." The Russian leader expressed hope that trade relations will lay a robust foundation to further develop "social and political vectors of cooperation." Reflecting long-standing rather than new realities, Lukashenko announced that "today, we created a state unified by political and legal means, and the joint customs border lies here in Brest."

Collective Security Approach

¶4. (U) The heads of state signed a declaration condemning attempts to rewrite WWII history, highlighting "the importance of further build-up of Belarusian-Russian interaction to guarantee collective security, including in the framework of the Organization for Collective Security Agreement, of development of the military and technological cooperation as well as the assistance in search for common responses of the international community to new challenges and threats of global nature." In the declaration, both parties committed to coordination of their approaches on the most important issues of the international relations "for the sake of just and democratic world order under the United Nations' vital role and rule of law."

Comment

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¶5. (SBU) Medvedev's visit to Belarus to a site of shared historic importance so early in his presidential tenure signals his desire to keep Belarus within the Russian sphere of influence. Although the two presidents did not speak publicly about gas price negotiations, which will play a most important role in determining the future relationship between Russia and Belarus, such sensitive themes were likely discussed behind closed doors. Given his jubilant appearance throughout the visit, Lukashenko was satisfied with at least the tone of their discussion.

Savage
Cloud